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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes recent national and state studies of dropout rates and associated factors among special education students. Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of special education exiters indicated a national dropout rate of 36% for school years 1985-86 and 1986-87, compared with 17% for the general school population. In 1987-88 comprehensive state-level data collected by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education indicated a national dropout rate of 27% plus an additional 17% in the "other" (mostly unknown) category. The largest percentage of dropouts was in the category of emotionally disturbed, while the largest number of school leavers was in the category of learning disabled. State special education dropout rates ranged from 2% in Connecticut to 46% in New York. The 1987 High School Transcript Study--a national study--found that special education students in small towns and rural areas were more likely to graduate than those in large or medium cities but less likely to graduate than those in urban fringe areas. A variety of studies have associated higher dropout rates with Hispanics, males, low income households, low parental educational attainment, poor academic performance, poor social adjustment, frequent absenteeism, low parental support, alcohol or drug problems, frequent school transfers, and grade repetition at the middle or high school level. Handicapped dropouts have high unemployment, low earnings, and few opportunities for further education. This paper contains 71 references. (SV)

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STUDENTS WITH HANDICAPS WHO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

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STUDENTS WITH HANDICAPS WHO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

Introduction

One of the six national goals for improvement in education that President Bush and the nation's governors recently articulated focuses directly on the problem of high school dropouts. This goal sets a specific target for the nation's high schools:

> By the year 2000, we will increase the percentage of students graduating from high school to at least 90 percent.

The inclusion of this goal in a set of objectives that signal renewed commitment to excellence in education reflects an understanding of the severe social and economic consequences of failure to complete high school. Dropouts experience significantly less success in the labor market in terms of employment and earnings than do high school graduates. They also are more likely to need social services, to become involved with the legal justice system, and to experience health problems, and they exhibit reduced political participation and social mobility.

A continuing concern of special education practitioners and policymakers is the sense that the experiences of youth with disabilities have been largely ignored in this increased attention to improving the educational status and outcomes of dropout-prone youth. For example, recent statistics on national dropout rates are based on surveys (e.g., High School and Beyond) that largely excluded special education students. Thus, the concern about a national dropout rate of 17 percent (Barro and Kolstad, 1987) or inner city rates approaching 50 percent of high school youth that has helped to focus national attention on the problem has not necessarily motivated educators and policymakers

to devote comparable attention to the needs of special education students who are at risk of dropping out.

At the same time, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Education Department has in fact undertaken a number of activities in recent years in an effort to understand and address the problem of dropping out among handicapped youth. These have included (1) state-level reporting of exit status statistics, (2) sponsorship of research on the magnitude and effects of failure to complete school, and (3) tracking of activities underway across the nation to address the problem. This paper reviews the results of some of these activities, including presentation of findings from recent studies that describe patterns of dropping out among special education students attending high schools in small towns and rural areas.

Dropping out of school before graduation is twice as likely among handicapped students as it is among nonhandicapped students in the United States. For example, data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study on a sample of 3,045 special education exiters indicate a national dropout rate of 36 percent for school years 1985-86 and 1986-87 (U.S. Department of Education, 1989), while data from the High School and Beyond Study for school year 1980 (Barro and Kolstad, 1987) show a national dropout rate for the general school-aged population of around 17.3 percent.

In an effort to obtain State-level comprehensive information on the size and nature of the exiting population of secondary-age special education exiters, OSEP began collecting data on these students from the States during the 1984-85 school year. States report data on the number of exiting special education students (defined as youth aged 14 and older who had received special education and related services during the previous school year but who were no longer receiving special or regular

education services). States report these data according to the exiting student's handicapping condition, age, and exit status: graduated with diploma, graduated through certification; reached the maximum age for which services are provided in the State; dropped out; or other reason (basis of exit unknown; deaths). The categories for exit status are mutually exclusive.

State-reported exiting data for school year 1987-88 indicate that a national total of 238,579 special education students exited the educational system (see Table 1). During that year, the majority of students who exited graduated with a diploma (42 percent) or a certificate (11.3 percent). However, importantly, the next most likely means of exiting from school was by dropping out (27.4 percent). At an approximate rate of 344 students per day, a total of 65,395 handicapped students dropped out of school during school year 1987-88.[1]

In addition, the "other" category in the State reporting system may well be composed primarily of dropouts who did not report their exiting status to their schools before departure. While this belief is yet to be confirmed through research, it is likely that a large proportion of special education exiters reported as "other" are, in fact, dropouts. For school year 1987-88, an additional 40,186 students, or around 17 percent of all exiters, were included in the "other" category, yielding a dropout rate of 44 percent. Thus, the actual rate of dropout among special education students probably lies between 27 and 44 percent.

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[1]All OSEP percentage rates are derived from the ratio of the number of students in an exit status category to the total of all special education school leavers, age 14-21+, for the specified school year.

TABLE 1

Number and Percentage of Students With Handicaps Exiting the Educational System, Age 14 Years and Older. 1987-88 School Year.

Exit Status	1987-88	
	Number	Percentage
Graduated with diploma	100,195	42.0
Graduated with certificate	26,832	11.3
Reached maximum age	5,971	2.5
Dropped out	65,395	27.4
Other/unknown	40,186	16.8
Total	238,579	100.0

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), 1989.

OSEP State-reported data show that 71 percent of handicapped dropouts leave school between the ages of 16 and 18, representing 20 percent of the total school leavers population per year (see Table 2). As data reported in Table 3 show, rates of dropping out vary by handicapping condition. For example, the most frequent type of exit for students with emotional disturbance is by dropping out of school, with 40 percent of these school leavers exiting by dropping out. In terms of numbers, most students who drop out are learning disabled; for school year 1987-88, 32,505 learning disabled students dropped out of school (see Table 3).

Dropout rates vary widely among the States. The number of students 14 years and older exiting the educational system during the 1987-88 school year ranged from only 15 dropouts in Hawaii to 8,808 in New York, with a mean of 1,222 students. Approximately 46 percent of all school leavers in New York reportedly exit by dropping out; Connecticut, on the other hand, reports that only 2 percent of their handicapped school leavers are dropouts (Table 4).

Other Studies of Dropping Out

In recent years, a number of States have also studied the dropout problem. These studies have reported dropout rates that range from 31 percent for mildly impaired youth in several districts in Florida (Fardig et al., 1985) and 34 percent in Vermont (Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe, 1985) to 40 percent for special education students in New Hampshire (Lichtenstein, 1987). Large districts, which tend to be located in urban areas, report the highest dropout rates (Jay and Padilla, 1987; Cobb and Crump, 1984; Fardig et al., 1985; Hasazi et al., 1985; and Zigmond and Thornton, 1985). Additionally, dropout rates for youth with learning disabilities have been reported as high as 42 percent (Cobb and Crump, 1984), 47 percent (Levin, Zigmond, and

Table 2

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DROPPING OUT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL
FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Individual/Family Characteristics	% of Exiters Who Dropped Out	Sample Size
Gender		
Male	37.5	1877
Female	33.5	1161
Urbanicity		
Urban	39.6	794
Suburban	29.3	818
Rural	35.7	635
Ethnicity		
White	33.9	1676
Black	38.2	615
Hispanic	44.0	209
Other	22.6	81
Household Income		
< $12,000 per year	42.0	560
$12,000 to $25,000 per year	37.8	707
≥ $25,000 per year	19.7	968
Head of Household Education		
Not a high school graduate	43.7	842
High school graduate	27.1	832
Some college or 2-year college degree	28.1	390
College degree or more	18.1	344

TABLE 3

Number and Percent of Students with Handicaps, 14 Years and Older, Exiting the Educational System by Basis of Exit: 19878-88 School Year

Handicapping Condition	Graduated with Diploma		Graduated With Certificate		Reached Maximum Age		Dropped Out		Other Basis of Exit		Total Exiting the System	
	Number	Percent-age	Number	Percent-age	Number	Percent-age	Number	Percent-age	Number	Percent-age	Number	Percent-age
All conditions	100,195	42.00	26,832	11.25	5,971	2.50	65,395	27.41	40,186	16.84	238,579	100.00
Learning disabled	38,053	47.75	10,373	8.53	844	0.69	32,505	26.74	19,806	16.29	121,581	100.00
Speech impaired	3,719	35.07	854	8.05	140	1.32	1,881	17.74	4,011	37.82	10,605	100.00
Mentally retarded	18,355	34.50	11,419	21.49	3,241	6.10	14,241	26.80	5,905	11.11	53,141	100.00
Emotionally disturbed	10,552	30.95	1,702	4.99	498	1.46	13,683	40.14	7,656	22.46	34,091	100.00
Hard of hearing and deaf	2,541	56.61	506	11.27	256	5.70	664	14.79	522	11.63	4,489	100.00
Multihandicapped	1,374	35.04	794	20.25	640	16.32	640	16.32	473	12.06	3,921	100.00
Orthopedically impaired	1,645	48.61	418	12.35	121	3.58	556	16.43	644	19.03	3,384	100.00
Other health imparied	1,179	35.63	545	16.47	169	5.11	725	21.91	691	20.88	3,309	100.00
Visually handicapped	925	55.93	160	9.67	37	2.24	300	18.14	232	14.03	1,654	100.00
Deaf-blind	119	38.89	58	18.95	25	8.17	79	25.82	25	8.17	306	100.00

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DAMS), 1989.

The total number of students exiting by basis of exit does not equal the sum of students exiting for individual handicapping conditions because some States did not report the handicapping condition of all exiting students. See data notes following tables in Appendix A.

Table 4.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS 14 YEARS AND OLDER EXITING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM
DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR 1987-88
BY BASIS OF EXIT

ALL CONDITIONS

STATE	GRADUATED WITH DIPLOMA	GRADUATED THROUGH CERTIFICATION	REACHED MAXIMUM AGE	DROPPED OUT	OTHER BASIS OF EXIT	TOTAL EXITING THE SYSTEM
ALABAMA	1,630	1,489	75	1,482	858	5,534
ALASKA	309	48	2	282	73	706
ARIZONA	1,362	116	38	743	132	2,391
ARKANSAS	1,316	372	51	571	74	2,384
CALIFORNIA	4,536	2,231	807	2,511	12,217	22,302
COLORADO	1,411	91	33	657	22	2,214
CONNECTICUT	1,200	60	57	29	5	1,351
DELAWARE	327	115	21	338	57	858
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	83	96	16	21	29	245
FLORIDA	3,426	717	399	2,387	1,163	8,092
GEORGIA	1,569	1,094	65	1,527	394	4,649
HAWAII	179	72	6	15	17	289
IDAHO	378	78	15	156	56	675
ILLINOIS	7,839	289	481	3,944	0	11,753
INDIANA	2,725	536	229	1,437	512	5,439
IOWA	1,857	157	26	762	410	3,212
KANSAS	1,271	0	22	587	422	2,222
KENTUCKY	1,884	176	44	1,045	392	3,541
LOUISIANA	700	1,183	53	1,348	994	4,278
MAINE	734	102	38	412	86	1,364
MARYLAND	600	50	373	421	0	1,444
MASSACHUSETTS	4,487	.	249	2,146	.	6,882
MICHIGAN	3,129	254	284	2,431	8,835	14,933
MINNESOTA	6,428	0	0	3,012	0	9,440
MISSISSIPPI	485	1,771	47	783	134	3,140
MISSOURI	2,262	906	66	2,114	1,086	6,434
MONTANA	330	75	3	111	73	592
NEBRASKA	266	36	26	188	245	681
NEVADA	241	146	17	70	13	487
NEW HAMPSHIRE	369	109	28	588	189	1,283
NEW JERSEY	7,283	0	101	3,183	302	10,869
NEW MEXICO	865	75	41	476	285	1,742
NEW YORK	5,950	3,584	649	8,808	0	18,991
NORTH CAROLINA	2,353	1,182	90	1,826	546	5,997
NORTH DAKOTA	233	29	12	102	52	428
OHIO	5,762	206	136	1,396	489	7,909
OKLAHOMA	1,184	96	28	455	133	1,816
OREGON	690	176	10	475	444	1,795
PENNSYLVANIA	6,869	387	248	2,866	6,217	16,499
PUERTO RICO	271	247	544	3,006	0	4,068
RHODE ISLAND	710	0	64	640	247	1,661
SOUTH CAROLINA	967	749	159	753	246	2,874
SOUTH DAKOTA	351	436	11	206	167	1,171
TENNESSEE	206	306	16	562	294	1,384
TEXAS	4,564	5,357	.	3,456	.	13,577
UTAH	1,027	46	22	579	259	1,933
VERMONT	321	28	11	232	23	615
VIRGINIA	1,996	842	76	1,474	600	4,988
WASHINGTON	1,627	249	19	1,382	809	4,086
WEST VIRGINIA	1,545	158	58	784	346	2,891
WISCONSIN	2,792	199	99	711	289	4,090
WYOMING	136	5	8	66	5	222
AMERICAN SAMOA	1	0	1	7	1	10
GUAM	74	0	1	20	12	107
NORTHERN MARIANAS	.	.	.	.	.	.
TRUST TERRITORIES	.	.	.	.	.	.
VIRGIN ISLANDS	.	.	.	.	.	.
BUR. OF INDIAN AFFAIRS	45	2	12	58	12	129
U.S. AND INSULAR AREAS	100,195	26,832	5,971	65,395	40,186	238,579
50 STATES, D.C. & P.R.	100,075	26,830	5,957	65,310	40,161	238,333

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS EXITING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FOR ALL HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS MAY NOT EQUAL THE SUM OF STUDENTS EXITING FOR INDIVIDUAL HANDICAPPING CONDITION BECAUSE SOME STATES DID NOT REPORT THE HANDICAPPING CONDITION OF THE EXITING STUDENTS.

DATA AS OF OCTOBER 1, 1989.

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Birch, 1985), 50 percent (Edgar, 1987), and 53 percent (Zigmond and Thornton, 1985).[2]

A recent national study, funded in part by OSEP, provides information on dropout rates for a subset of handicapped and nonhandicapped students by population density. The 1987 High School Transcript Study (HSTS) collected detailed information on handicapped and nonhandicapped students enrolled in the eleventh grade in a national sample of comprehensive high schools in school year 1985-86, thus generally representing the high school class of 1987. This source provides information on student exiting behavior for a one-year period.

Data reported in Table 5 show one-year dropout rates for handicapped and nonhandicapped students by urban density. Fourteen percent of handicapped students attending schools in medium-sized cities dropped out of school during the one-year period, while 12 percent of those attending schools in small places (defined as schools in localities with fewer than 25,000 population) dropped out. Thus, students in small towns and rural areas were as likely to drop out of school as those attending schools in large cities, a finding that is somewhat contradictory to findings of studies on nonhandicapped students, which generally report much higher dropout rates among youth in inner cities than elsewhere. It is also noteworthy that dropout rates among handicapped students were twice as high as those among nonhandicapped students (6 versus 12 percent, on average for a one-year period).

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[2]In reviewing these rates, it is important to note that variations occur and can be attributable to numerous factors, such as varying definitions of a dropout, data collection periods, ratios employed to obtain rates, nature of the population studies, geographic location of the study, and severity level of the population studied.

TABLE 5

Distribution of Handicapped and Nonhandicapped High School Students by Urban Density and Dropout Rates

1987

Urban density	Rates of reported dropouts	
	Handicapped students %	Nonhandicapped students %
Big city	12.0%	8.6%
Urban fringe	9.1%	5.9%
Medium city	14.0%	6.0%
Small place	12.1%	5.3%
Mean	11.8%	6.1%

SOURCE: 1987 High School Transcript Study
School File; Student File

Findings presented in Table 6 provide additional details on exit status for handicapped students by urban density. Overall, 48 percent of handicapped students enrolled in the eleventh grade in school year 1985-86 graduated with their class in 1987. Forty-four percent achieved a standard diploma, while 7 percent graduated through a special diploma. Three percent received a certificate of attendance. Of particular interest is the percentage of students who exited high school for "other" reasons, which includes an unknown proportion of dropouts.

Table 6 shows the variations in exit status by urban density. Special education students attending schools in small towns and rural areas were more likely to graduate with a diploma than those in large or medium cities, but less likely to graduate with a diploma than students in urban fringe areas. Students in small towns more often received a certificate of attendance than students in other localities (5 percent versus less than 2 percent for students in other localities). Further, students in small towns were more often still enrolled in school at the end of 1987 than those in other locations, with nearly 27 percent still attending high school.

The data available from HSTS provide additional evidence of the seriousness of the dropout problem for handicapped high school students. The fact that they were twice as likely as nonhandicapped students to drop out in their last year in high school suggests the need for increased availability of educational and other services that will encourage these students to complete high school in order to maximize the likelihood that they will make a successful transition to further education or the labor force. In the next section of the paper, we explore factors associated with dropping out of school.

Table 6

Distribution of Handicapped High School Students
by Urban Density and Exit Status
1987

Urban density	Student exit status: Std. diploma	Honors diplomma	Spec. ed. diploma	Certif. attend.	Still enrolled	Dropped out	Other	Total	Total handic. students in area
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Big city	32.2%	0.0%	5.6%	1.4%	25.0%	12.0%	23.7%	100.0%	17.1%
Urban fringe	50.1%	0.0%	3.6%	0.8%	18.3%	9.1%	18.2%	100.0%	21.1%
Medium City	42.3%	0.0%	4.4%	1.6%	23.8%	14.0%	14.0%	100.0%	18.2%
Small place	45.7%	0.2%	3.8%	4.7%	26.8%	12.1%	6.8%	100.0%	43.6%
% of handic. student pop.	43.7%	0.1%	4.2%	2.7%	24.2%	11.6%	13.4%	100.0%	100.0%

Other: Transferred, GED, unknown

SOURCE: 1987 School Transcript Study
School File; Student File

Factors Associated With Dropping Out

OSEP's National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) provides data on factors associated with dropping out of secondary school for youth with disabilities (see Table 2). Forty-two percent of exiters who dropped out were in households where the average income was less than $12,000 per year, while only 20 percent came from households averaging $25,000 or more per year. Forty-four percent of dropouts came from homes where the head of household was not a high school graduate; around 18 percent came from homes whose head had earned at least a college degree. In terms of ethnicity, exiters who were Hispanic were more likely to drop out than Blacks (44 versus 36 percent) or whites (34 percent). Male exiters were more likely to be dropouts than were female exiters (38 versus 34 percent).

A recent California study provides information on other factors associated with dropping out. In this study, special education directors were asked to indicate the characteristics of handicapped students who drop out by handicapping condition (Table 7; Jay and Padilla, 1987). Most districts indicated that learning handicapped dropouts had poor academic performance (85 percent) and poor social adjustment (71 percent). From 48 percent to 67 percent of the districts reported that learning handicapped dropouts were characterized by frequent absenteeism (67 percent), little parental support (67 percent), low

TABLE 7

Percentage of Districts[1] That Said That Various Characteristics Mainly Describe Secondary Special Education Dropouts in Various Disability Groups

	Learning Handicapped	Speech Impaired	Communicatively Handicapped	Physically Handicapped	Severely Handicapped
Poor academic performance	85[2]	32	72	27	44
Poor social adjustment	71	60	76	26	76
Alcohol or drug problems	48	16	27	7	30
Frequent absenteeism (due to health or other reasons)	67	16	31	66	58
Low participation in extracurricular Activities	62	48	54	53	51
Low socioeconomic status	50	19	19	13	20
Non-English speaking	6	11	7	0	9
Little parental support	67	32	30	14	26
Number of responding districts	(135)	(25)	(29)	(15)	(34)

[1]Each column includes districts that said they had dropouts with that disability.

[2]Eighty-five percent of districts that had learning handicapped dropouts said that these students are mainly characterized by poor academic performance.

Source: E. Deborah Jay and Christine L. Padilla, Special Education Dropouts, SRI International, Menlo Park, California, 1987.

participation in extracurricular activities (62 percent), low socioeconomic status (50 percent), and alcohol or drug problems (48 percent). Districts that had speech impaired dropouts, communicatively handicapped dropouts, and severely handicapped dropouts were most likely to believe that these youth had poor social adjustment (60, 67, and 76 percent, respectively). By contrast, districts that had physically handicapped dropouts were most likely to say that these students were characterized by frequent absenteeism due to health or other reasons (66 percent). Additionally, students who lived in large urban or suburban districts had a greater dropout rate than those who lived in small, rural districts (Jay and Padilla, 1987).

Grade repetition at the middle or high school level has a devastating effect on LD students' ability to stay in school, according to one study by de Bettencourt, Zigmond, and Thornton (1987). Almost 50 percent of the LD students in rural school districts repeated a grade during their school history, with two-thirds of these students leaving school before graduation. In fact, every student (LD or not) who repeated ninth grade left school before graduation. Absence and tardiness in eighth grade were also powerful predictors of dropping out of school (Zigmond, 1987).

Edgar (1987) reports that in a 1985-86 cohort of Seattle special education students, mildly handicapped students with more than one release from school had less than a 5 percent chance of reaching graduation. Additionally, dropouts tended to be those students who transferred to different school settings during the school year more often than did graduates. Thirty-five percent of the dropout population transferred two or more times, as opposed to 15 percent for the graduating populations; 62 percent of the graduates never transferred. Special education students at highest risk of not completing their high school programs were black students who were behaviorally disordered and learning

disabled, who had previously been released from school at least once, and who were behind in earning graduation credits.

Research conducted in New Hampshire shows that students who were mildly handicapped and capable of being mainstreamed were at the greatest risk of dropping out, especially those identified as learning disabled, mentally retarded, emotionally handicapped, or hearing, speech, and health impaired (Lichtenstein, 1987). This finding suggests that additional support and monitoring may be required for students with mild disabilities in a mainstreamed environment as a deterrent to dropping out. Further, identification of dropout-prone students early in their school careers so that positive interventions may be initiated before students reach high school (Novak and Dougherty, 1979; Weber, 1986) and provision of specialized guidance and counseling services before students enter high school and continually throughout their high school careers are also recommended as strategies to reduce the incidence of dropping out (Weber, 1986).

Consequences of Dropping Out

Concern about dropouts is predicated on a belief that leaving high school before graduation is harmful to the individual and for society (Rumberger, 1987). While some studies show that not all dropouts are behind in school or have substandard test scores (Fine, 1986), and that some at least have an equal or greater sense of self-esteem and control than high school graduates (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), most evidence supports the perception that dropping out has negative personal and social consequences.

The major consequences of dropping out of school for handicapped students (as well as their nonhandicapped peers) include poor employment potential, fewer opportunities for further education, and lower earnings for those employed. In one

of the more recent surveys of special education students, in which a 1985-86 cohort of graduates from Seattle's special education program was interviewed, 27 percent of the dropouts were employed as opposed to 65 percent the 1985-86 graduates (Edgar and Levine, 1987). A Vermont study of transitioning special education students reported highest earnings for those who graduated (28 percent obtained more than $5.00 per hour; only 11 percent of the dropouts received comparable pay (Hasazi, Gordon, Roe, 1985). Further analysis of these data revealed that the manner of exit from school was significantly related to employment: for identifiably disabled students, the presence or absence of a diploma was less important to the job (Gordon, 1987), but for the mildly handicapped student, the manner of leaving school was related to employment and earnings.

In a study conducted by de Bettencourt, Zigmond, and Thornton (1985) of rural LD dropouts, rural employment rates for dropouts exceeded those reported for urban dropouts. These researchers speculated that a number of factors were operating to produce the differences: the rural LD students, in comparison to the urban LD students studied by Zigmond and Thornton in 1985, were identified as LD at an earlier age and had higher WISC-R scores and mathematics and reading achievement scores than the urban students. Finally, these students were more likely to be white and female than were their urban counterparts.

While much of the data on the social consequences of dropping out for the general population of high school-aged students is outdated, social and economic data on the handicapped dropout population simply do not exist. Studies on forgone income and lost governmental revenues, increased demands for social services, increased crime, and reduced constructive social and political participation are unavailable. However, since the rate of dropping out among handicapped students exceeds that for the nonhandicapped population by at least 10 percent, we can

assume that the personal, social, and economic costs exceed those known for the general school-aged population.

Data on the general school-aged population who are dropouts illustrate that the reduced skills of a dropout affect the ability to obtain employment or to obtain further education to remain competitive in the job market. According to a recent U.S. General Accounting Office report, 14 percent of male dropouts and about one-half of female dropouts aged 16 to 24 were not labor force participants (neither employed nor looking for work) in 1985. Among high school graduates not enrolled in college, 6 percent of males and 20 percent of females were not in the labor force in 1985 (GAO, 1986). Even those dropouts who were able to secure year-round, full-time employment still earned from 12 percent to 18 percent less than workers who completed high school (Rumberger, 1987). Census data reveal that the difference in expected lifetime earnings from ages 18 to 64 between a male high school graduate and a male high school dropout in 1979 was more than $250,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983). McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985) concluded that about one-half of the difference in lifetime earnings between noncompleters and graduates was due to differences between them in ability and other factors, and about one-half was due to dropping out.

The forgone income of dropouts also affects on revenues to society. In a study dating back to 1972, Levin estimated that for males aged 25-34 who failed to finish high school, $237 billion were lost in income and another $71 million lost in government revenues. Adjusting for current income and revenues, the dollars lost today would be much higher (Levin, 1972). In the same study, Levin cited five additional social consequences of inadequate education: increased demand for social services, increased crime, reduced political participation, reduced intergenerational mobility, and poorer levels of health (Levin, 1972; Lyke, 1986).

Summary

In sum, then, research on the social and economic consequences of failure to graduate from high school emphasize the importance of the national goal that calls for a 90 percent graduation rate by the year 2000. The challenge to special educators at all levels--federal, state, and local--is to ensure the the severity of this problem among youth with handicaps is recognized and that the programmatic strategies and initiatives developed to enable the nation to reach this goal pay specific attention to the needs of these youth.

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